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The Play's the Thing

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Across the world, knowledgeable early childhood educators value young children's play, a phenomenon established by their predecessors over hundreds of years (Froebel, 1826; Montessori, 1916; Piaget, 1945). Play is recognised by the United Nations as every child's right (OHCHR, 1989); it is accorded sacred status by many early childhood educators and philosophers (Cannella, 1997; Gadamer, 2003), it is embedded in many countries' early childhood frameworks and the potential benefits for young children are lauded (Baines and Blatchford, 2011; Fromberg and Bergen, 2006; Moyles, 2015). One definition of play is '…freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child' (National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), Children's Play Council and Playlink (2000) and a definition of free play is 'play in which players themselves decide what and how to play and are free to modify the goals and rules as they go along' (Gray, 2013: 7). Nevertheless, in the early part of the twenty-first century, there has been growing acknowledgement that some young children's opportunities for play, especially free play, have become increasingly compromised, colonised and denied (Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Gray, 2013). This phenomenon is not universal: policymakers in some countries value young children's free play as a key element of early childhood education and care provision. For example, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education (2012) values independent child-led play in early childhood settings and Hungary has a government policy of free play for all children in education and care provision up to the age of seven (Ministry of Human Resources, 2012). Equally, Gupta (2018: 21) describes the 'privileging of the role of play' in early childhood in India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Yet many children in the early twenty-first century have fewer opportunities for free play than was the case one or two generations ago, and in the places where this trend occurs, it has been linked to increasing obesity, weak motor and brain development and psychological disorders (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Goddard-Blythe, 2005; Gray, 2013; Reunamo, Hakala, Saros, Lehto, Kyhälä and Valtonen, 2014). There are many complex reasons for some children experiencing fewer free play opportunities; in this final editorial for the 2018 volume of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* I consider three perceived problems that may have contributed to that phenomenon: undervaluing children's play, policymakers' interference and lack of trust in children. In considering the three problems, I propose ways that each might be addressed, and in doing so, I argue that the trend in some parts of the world for reducing young children's access to play opportunities, particularly free play opportunities, must be reversed if children are to flourish.

Firstly, young children's play often tends to be undervalued. One reason for this is that although many definitions, types and taxonomies of play have been identified (*inter alia*, Hughes, 2002; Hutt, Tyler, Hutt, & Christopherson, 1989; National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) *et al*., 2000; Parten, 1932), there is no universally agreed definition of play. There is some consensus that play resides with the player in his or her situated context, but this means that attempts to define play are congruent with 'catching bubbles' (Moyles, 2015: 16). In particular, free play is dynamic and difficult to understand for those who are not engaged in the play. However, knowledgeable early childhood educators who are confident in knowing their children and the context of their free play are in a strong position to understand that play and to communicate its value to others. They understand young children's motivations for their play and how it may positively affect children's wider lives in therapeutic, social and exploratory ways, as well as its importance as a purely ludic pursuit. Yet the low-status field of early childhood education has too few practitioners with those high levels of knowledge and confidence. For young children's free play to be valued requires early childhood educators to be advanced thinkers who can draw on the store of epistemic, academic, technical and

practical knowledge that informs the field of early childhood education and care. Early childhood educators without access to that store of knowledge through, for example, graduate level education, are likely to find it difficult to leverage young children's play beyond that which is immediately in front of them. They may witness experientially the effects of play on children's well-being *in vivo* or compare what they see with a curriculum framework, and so identify the play they see as a vehicle for supporting children to gain knowledge. However, being able to understand and articulate the value of the play for its own sake, as well as its potential for longer-term benefits and connectedness to other parts of children's lives requires advanced knowledge. Moreover, the field of early childhood education and care must continue to replenish that store of knowledge by producing new high-quality research evidence about young children's play on which educators can draw. Well educated early childhood educators can contribute such research evidence to the field.

High-quality research evidence about young children's play may also prove persuasive to policymakers whose interest in early childhood education and care in recent years has provided both benefits and problems. Benefits have included wider recognition of the importance of early childhood as a life phase, alongside significant funding for the field. However, the funding and recognition have contributed to some policymakers colonising children's play experiences in ways that invade at the micro-level. For example, while they may acknowledge value in young children's play, some policymakers orientate policy towards standards and high stakes testing (Elkind, 2008; Gray, 2013), leading to early childhood policy documents requiring adults to control children's play by 'planning and implementing learning through play' (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments, 2009: 16) and providing 'planned, purposeful play' (Department for Education, 2017: 9). Such policies inhibit young children's opportunities to play freely and transfer power from children to adults in matters affecting children. Young children's play has intrinsic value; its use is not only as a tool for upskilling a population (Lester and Russell 2008). The autotelic processes inherent in young children's authentic play that reflect children's genuine desires and afford them agency are not derived from adults' plans and purposes for children's play (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). To maximise the benefits of young children's play then, it may be beneficial for policymakers and educators to afford control and power to young children in respect of play, as is the case in Hungary, for example.

Such an affordance requires adults to trust children. Play is natural and necessary for children (Louv, 2005) and it provides an authentic context for their agency, or their capacity 'to act independently' (James and James 2008: 9). Nevertheless, adults' lack of trust in young children's abilities to lead their own play in many twenty-first century contexts is evidenced in reduced availability to children of natural and hand-made resources for their free play, less access in many countries for children to play in natural spaces and increased supervision by adults, attributed to concerns about risk, long days in daycare and school while both parents work, additional out-of-school lessons and more homework for children (Chudacoff, 2007; Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012). In the twenty-first century, adults in many countries are directing young children's lives increasingly closely, denying them the agency, space and freedom that previous generations of children in those countries could devote to playing freely. Such direction limits children's capacity to the expectations adults may have of them; it disrespects children's right to play and is an indication of adults' lack of trust in children's abilities. Conversely, Gray (2013) notes that adults who trust and support children to lead their own activities enable them to build capacity by communicating to them:

> *'You are competent… and can figure things out. You know your own abilities and limitations. Through play and exploration you will learn what you need to know. Your needs are valued. Your opinions count. You are responsible for your own mistakes and can be trusted to learn from them'* (p. 210).

In respect of play, adults' trust in young children to know what is good for them not only facilitates children's right to play but affords them agency which gives them freedom to exceed adults' expectations of them in - and beyond - play.

Within the scope of this editorial, it is only possible to touch on a few of the complex issues underlying the reduction in a number of countries of young children's opportunities to engage in play, particularly free play. Although this is not a universal phenomenon, it has constituted a growing trend in some contexts that has been reported in much international discourse concerning early childhood (*i.a.* Wood and Hedges, 2016). Opportunities to play freely are necessary for young children's mental and physical health and are beneficial for other aspects of their lives, including education. However, how and why play – particularly free play – is important is not well understood by policymakers nor even many early childhood educators. More research and education are needed to address that lack of understanding if we are to reverse that trend and return play to young children.

Each of the articles that appear in this issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* relates implicitly or explicitly to play opportunities for young children, whether addressing a specific aspect of the early childhood curriculum or as part of a wider focus on interactions or transition from early childhood settings into school. The first article from Omar Sulaymani, Marilyn Fleer and Denise Chapman. '*Understanding children's motives when using iPads in Saudi classrooms: Is it for play or for learning*' explores whether children aged 5-6 years regarded their own engagements with iPads in Saudi classrooms as play or learning as part of a small-scale study. Analysis of video observations and interviews revealed that tablets were considered as a learning tool. Zenna Kingdon's article reports on her study that explored children's engagements in role play in pack-away early childhood settings in England. *'Young children as beings, becomings, having beens: An integrated approach to role-play'* addresses how young children's positionings in three temporal states were observed during play and role play and appeared to inform the children's understanding of complex world structures. In *'Parental guidance of young children's mathematics and scientific inquiry in games, cooking, and nature activities',* Maureen Vandermaas-Peeler, Lauren Westerberg, Hailey Fleishman, Kaitlin Sands and Melissa Mischka explore how games were among co-constructed activities young children engaged in with parents to develop new conceptual understandings of mathematics and scientific inquiry in social contexts. In *'Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions and its Relations to Children's Classroom Engagement and Disaffection in Vietnamese Kindergartens',* Nhi Hoang, Leena Holopainen, and Martti Siekinen report data from 1474 kindergarten children and 60 teachers from 12 kindergartens in three Vietnamese cities that were collected and analysed as part of a cross-cultural study. Findings indicate that teacher sensitivity and regard for children's perspectives were lower in Vietnamese early childhood settings than was the case in settings in Finland, Germany, the United States, and China.

The final three articles in this issue are concerned with young children's transition from kindergarten to school. Christopher Brown and Yi-Chin Lan's article *'Understanding Families' Conceptions of School Readiness: A Qualitative Metasynthesis'* reports on a qualitative metasynthesis of studies concerning ways that families in the United States of America conceptualise school readiness. The article considers not only how families might help their children be ready for school but also how early childhood stakeholders might be ready for families with children making the transition into school. In her article '*The problem-solving process as part of professionals' boundary work in preschool to school transition',* Laura Rantavuori also considers how professionals might support transition from early childhood settings into school. She reports on a qualitative study that explored 'boundary work' between the two types of provision to address issues of continuity for young children in respect of pedagogy, institutional structures and values. *'Supporting the Kindergarten–Primary School Transition in Hong Kong: Reform in a Teacher Training Programme'* by Eunice Pui-yu

Yim is the final article in this issue. The article reports on a study that captured views of teacher education tutors and their students about a programme that offered kindergarten teachers a way to address children's transitions between Hong Kong kindergartens and primary schools which tend to be characterised by conflicting education values.

I commend to you this issue, not least its final section: a set of ERA abstracts curated by Eric Atmore and John Ng'Asike who highlight articles based on research from the African continent.

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